



Margit Ernst-Habib, *But Why Are You Called a Christian? An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 2013.

The 450th anniversary of the Heidelberg Catechism has seen the production and publication of countless studies, celebratory volumes, and articles. The present contribution is one of the best of the crop. Its value lies in the fact that it not only discusses the catechism but offers a historical introduction to it and a theological rationale for its continued appreciation and use.

Accordingly, in **Part One, Learning By Heart. Encountering the Heidelberg Catechism**, Habib (a German theologian who has taught in the States) outlines the various purposes of the catechism.

Part Two is a proper historical introduction to the Catechism and is titled **Disputes, Doctrines, and Decisions. The Historical and Theological Background of the Heidelberg Catechism**. Here Habib gives readers insight into the historical situation which gave birth to, nurtured, and saw the rise of the Catechism. Interestingly, a very good albeit necessarily short biography of the Catechism's author is also offered.

Part Three, the penultimate section of the volume, is **The State We Are In. The Theological Composition of the Heidelberg Catechism, its Triple Knowledge and the Human Condition**. This segment lays the foundation for the commentary on the Catechism which follows in **Part Four**. There, the question “**But Why Are You Called a Christian?**” **A Brief Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism** is the issue. Here readers are treated to the best commentary on the Catechism since Karl Barth's “*Learning Jesus Christ Through the Heidelberg Catechism*”.

The final bit of the book is a select bibliography which is really quite thorough.

Habib's writing style is lucid and folksy (in a very good way). Readers are immediately aware of the fact that here a theologian with experience speaking to general audiences is at work. She, however, does not 'talk down' to her audience. Instead, she speaks clearly and understandably to her readers.

The content of the volume, the meat on the plate, is well organized, nicely 'cut', and – and this is no overstatement – lovingly presented. One knows instantly that Habib is a great admirer of the Catechism and wishes readers to love it too.

Of her work, in her own words, she remarks

... the purpose and aim of the Heidelberg Catechism: to engage the intellectual as well as emotional faculties of each believer in order to enable them to give an account of their faith *and* to experience the comfort of God's grace (p. 10).

She again observes

... this **Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism** tries to listen carefully to this significant voice of the time of the Reformation in order to become acquainted with its teachings, but also in order to provide a starting point for a critical conversation with it (p. 20).

That, in sum, is exactly what she manages. She helps readers not simply to learn the contents of the Catechism, but to interact with it.

I love this book. I admire Habib's style. She is witty and clever and knows the culture well enough to meld 16th century texts with pop culture references. For instance, in Part Three, **The State We Are In. The Theological Composition of the Heidelberg Catechism, its Triple Knowledge and the Human Condition**, she opens the chapter like this:

The Heidelberg Catechism is no "Christian-Doctrine Wiki", and even though it was used as a Christian textbook within Reformed churches for centuries, it is not simply a systematic discussion of major doctrines from a Reformed perspective (p. 38).

Her commentary proper on the Catechism in Part Four is, again, just simply superb. So, of Questions 83–85 (on the Office of the Keys, and Church Discipline), she comments

Christian discipline, the second key, is also directed first of all at repentance, not at exclusion... Those who “profess unchristian teachings or live unchristian lives”, although they call themselves Christians, are to be excluded from the sacraments; not because they are sinners since *all* members of the church are sinners and are, because of that, called to the Lord’s Supper. They are to be excluded because they *live* their lives contrary to God’s gift of grace, or because they *teach* a comfortless doctrine contrary to God’s gift of grace (p. 118).

If you’re looking for an introduction to the Catechism, this is the book you’re seeking. If you’re looking for a commentary on the Catechism, this is the book you want. It is genius.

If I were to find fault with it I would, and could only say that it isn’t long enough. I wish Habib had written more. I wish she had written a good old fashioned 800 page Prolegomenon and followed it up with a 932 page historical introduction and then put pen to paper for a 1001 page commentary on the Catechism. But that is rather a lot to ask of someone. So I’ll have to content myself with what I have at hand. And I’m grateful for it.

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